DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 689 CE 056 725

AUTHOR Braid, Mary; Macaskill, Sandra, Ed.
TITLE Workplace Education. Tapping Your Greatest Asset in the 1990s. A Handbook on Education in the Workplace.
INSTITUTION Scottish Community Education Council, Edinburgh.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 40p.; British Petroleum Company P.L.C. and Scotlander provided support in the production of this book.
AVAILABLE FROM Scottish Community Education Council, West Coates House, 90 Haymarket Terrace, Edinburgh EH12 5LQ, Scotland (4.00 pounds).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Basic Education; Adult Education; Adult Literacy; *Basic Skills; *Corporate Education; Foreign Countries; Illiteracy; *Industrial Training; *Inplant Programs; Labor Force Development; Literacy Education; Nonschool Educational Programs; On the Job Training; Refresher Courses; *Retraining; Staff Development
IDENTIFIERS *Scotland

ABSTRACT

Workplace education (WPE) has a significant role to play in solving basic skills problems and in other training requirements. In addition to the benefit of a more able, adaptable work force, WPE leads to more contented workers, encouraged by better employment opportunities. In addition, employees benefit by being more confident both within the workplace and beyond it. Trade unions benefit from a better educated membership, more able to take a full part in industrial relations. Principles of WPE are set out in the International Labour Organisation Convention 140, adopted by Britain in 1975. Italy, Sweden, Belgium, and Canada all have experience with WPE. Scotland, which launched its first WPE scheme--the Lothian WPE pilot--in 1988, lags behind the rest of Europe. A survey of employees conducted by the Scottish Community Education Council has discovered a high incidence of basic skills problems and a real desire among employees for a second chance at education through provision of WPE at their place of work. Some models that might be adapted to suit Scottish business and industry are described: they are the Sheffield (England) City Council's Take Ten Scheme; Ford Motor Company's Employee Development and Assistance Program; The Frontier College (Canada) Workplace Tuition Program; and Italy's 150-hour WPE scheme. (YLB)

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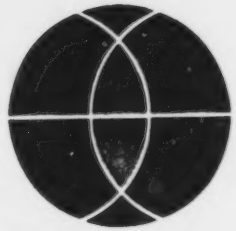

WORKPLACE EDUCATION

TAPPING YOUR GREATEST ASSET IN THE 1990 s

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A handbook on education in the workplace

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FOREWORD

Many people in business today believe that the principal role of schools, colleges and universities should be to provide the nation with a well educated and trained workforce. They complain that standards have dropped in recent years and that too many young people lack basic skills. The consequences for industry and commerce – particularly at a time of unprecedented world-wide competition – can be serious; in extreme cases, fatal.

There is, undoubtedly, considerable anecdotal evidence to substantiate these fears although reports from the SED, SCOTVEC and the universities suggest something different. It appears that more young people than ever before are obtaining qualifications and many at higher grades and levels. Even our record on basic literacy and numeracy in Scotland appears to be the best in the UK and twice as good as the worst areas.

Clearly, there is a problem. However good we are, it is still not enough and serious concerns remain. This booklet deals with practical matters relating to such issues. It looks at some of the most important factors affecting the efficiency and skills of many employees, both here and abroad. It focuses on people who have not benefited adequately from their educational

system, far more of them than is generally acknowledged. By way of examples, it suggests what might or is being done to improve matters. It demonstrates that – given the right approach – even those lacking the most basic skills are willing to be helped, to everyone's advantage. Above all else, this booklet does not seek to blame. Its quest is simply the "best way forward".

For anyone concerned with current demographic shifts, fast changing technologies and rising skills shortages, I commend this booklet as essential reading.

RON LANDER
Chief Executive, Scotlander plc
Past Chairman, CBI Scotland
Education & Training Committee

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SECTION 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO WORKPLACE EDUCATION AND ITS VITAL ROLE IN BEATING THE GROWING SKILLS CRISIS

The 1990s skills crisis

Industry and commerce will feel the full force of the demographic time-bomb in the 1990s with companies finding it increasingly difficult to recruit 16-18 year olds. Businesses will then be forced to look to their existing workforces for the skills they need to compete in markets at home and abroad.

Enterprising employers will be looking at efficient, cost-effective ways of maximising the skills of their employees. For many this will mean turning for the first time to groups, such as manual workers and women, previously overlooked for in-house training. Surveys show that a lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills - estimated to

affect more than 10% of all British workers and an even greater proportion of manual workers - may be the only obstacle preventing many employees developing to their full potential.

The cost of basic skills deficiencies to British industry is immense and, unless the problem is tackled, it will stifle our attempts to meet the challenges of new markets opening up in 1992 and in the approach to the next century. Workplace education (WPE) has a significant role to play in solving basic skills problems and in other training requirements.

What is Workplace Education?

WPE is the provision of educational courses for employees at their place of work or during their working hours without loss of pay. WPE schemes provide an economic way for employers to tap the skills and talents of their existing workforces in the midst of the present demographic crisis.

WPE can cover all levels of learning, including basic numeracy and literacy skills. As technological advance continues, computer literacy is also becoming regarded as an essential employment skill. Help with numeracy, literacy and computer skills is an essential prerequisite in the training of manual workers, who are most often failed by the school system and overlooked in selection for both company and trade union financed training courses. Shift

work and domestic responsibilities often bar these employees from joining local authority college courses in their own time.

Although WPE is a new educational concept in Scotland, it is practised widely in Europe and North America and operates in a number of places in England. It has been developed in a number of ways and has the potential for even greater diversity. WPE recently made its debut in Scotland in a pilot organised by the Scottish Community Education Council (SCEC) and Lothian Regional Council's Adult Basic Education Unit.

What benefits does WPE offer employers?

As the demographic trend begins to bite, it will become even clearer that the success of British companies at home, in Europe and further afield depends on raising the skills level of its whole workforce. With fewer youngsters around, recruiting and retaining staff will be major problems and employers will have to make more of the workers they have.

Several studies - including a report on the basic educational needs of manual workers published by SCEC last year - have shown that a sizable proportion of the workforce suffers from a poor grasp of basic literacy and numeracy, a major factor in their failure to progress within a company and develop new skills. Their loss is also their employer's loss. WPE can end this waste.

At the most elementary level, deficient literacy and numeracy skills prevent proper appreciation of safety procedures and work instructions, costing a company time and, in some cases, substantial amounts of money. Industrial accidents are sometimes caused by employees who cannot read or fully appreciate safety instructions. Those who do not have basic skills take longer to instruct and need more supervision than colleagues who more easily understand manuals and memos. Studies have shown those lacking basic skills are 15-20% slower than more literate workmates - a worrying fact when employees are being asked to adapt more often to rapid technological advance.

On the one hand employers need employees with literacy and numeracy skills which can be transferred to a variety of situations, but on the other hand employers have not yet taken on the responsibility for providing such training. Those who ignore the basic educational needs of their employees can almost certainly expect to lose out to more enlightened competitors.

In addition to the benefit of a more able, adaptable workforce, WPE also leads to more contented workers, encouraged by better employment opportunities. Happy staff are liable to stay with their company longer, aiding staff retainment at a time when recruitment will be extremely difficult. More literate staff pave the way for improved communication between

management and workers, and, consequently, stronger industrial relations.

How does WPE benefit employees?

Improved literacy and numeracy skills bring greater confidence to employees, allowing them to carry out current tasks better and to tackle new ones with less trepidation. Some extremely able employees are dissuaded from applying for internal promotion because an application form would highlight basic skills deficiencies which until then have gone undetected. Help here could put advancement in their company within reach, creating greater job satisfaction and contentment. More articulate, they are likely to be better able to discuss dissatisfactions with their employers before they become contentious issues.

The effects of greater confidence extend beyond the workplace. Many of those who have been given a second chance at education through the support of their employer say the experience has changed their lives by giving them the confidence to consider other forms of education and training.

What are the benefits to trade unions?

Trade unions benefit from a better educated membership, more able to take a full part in industrial relations. By improving communication skills, WPE should boost the declared aim of

some unions to improve representation, particularly among women and part-time workers.

The unique deal struck recently between five unions and the Ford Motor Company, which established workplace education as part of the settlement, has seen the emergence of WPE as a powerful bargaining tool in Britain.

SECTION 2

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WORKPLACE EDUCATION

WPE's adoption in Europe

The principles of workplace education, or paid educational leave, are set out in the International Labour Organisation Convention 140, adopted by Britain in 1975. Since Convention 140 is not legally binding, signatory states are only asked to devise policies designed to promote WPE. The schemes which have since evolved follow no set formula.

The Italian experience

EEC countries were making headway with WPE before Britain even adopted the principle. In 1973, Italian workers won the legal right to 150 hours of workplace education. Since then, more than a million adults have attended WPE courses financed and organised by the state and local authorities. Trade union support for the projects has played a part in their success and unions play a major role in the local promotion of schemes.

The Swedish and Belgian experience

Legislation was introduced in Sweden in 1975 to allow all workers time off for WPE with the guarantee of the same or an equivalent position on return to work. The act imposes no restrictions on the kind of education that can be undertaken. 1985 saw the introduction of Belgian legislation which entitles private sector workers up to 240 hours of vocational training or 160 hours of general training or education at the state's expense.

WPE's advance in North America

The principle of WPE has been widely supported in Canada where the government estimates lack of basic literacy skills among employees costs the Canadian economy more than $10 billion annually. It claims basic education deficiencies are at the root of industrial accidents, reduced productivity, lost markets and poor morale. It also recognises that the international competitiveness of Canadian companies could be significantly enhanced by improving basic skills.

The Frontier College operates Learning in the Workplace, a programme funded by the Canadian government, which aims to meet people's learning needs at work. Basic literacy, English as a second language and technology studies are all covered by the scheme.

The Frontier College works with companies to establish the employees' needs and to create tailor-made programmes. The companies' more able staff volunteer to be part-time workplace tutors and, after training, they lead learning groups with similar needs and interests.

WPE in Britain - the story so far

THE FORD MOTOR COMPANY DEAL

The interest of employers, unions and the government in Britain has been patchy. For many in British industry, the first encounter with WPE came last year through the deal struck between the Ford Motor Company and the five unions who represent its 32,000 employees. Under the £1.8m Employee Development and Assistance Programme (EDAP), every employee - from managing director to janitor - can apply for grants of up to £200 to study almost anything from basic literacy to Open University degrees. Only technical courses already offered by the company and purely recreational activities are not supported by the scheme. If employees cannot attend colleges because of shift patterns, the company arranges for tutors to hold classes at work.

The scheme is similar to one already operating in Ford's US factories. The company believes that it will help create a better trained workforce and that management, unions and employees will all benefit. The hunger to learn is undoubtedly

there. Initial forecasts put take-up in the first year at 5%. However, this was quickly revised after early interest showed participation could exceed 20%.

Management and unions believe education packages will become a regular feature of pay and conditions settlements. For unions, clauses on education could provide greater employment security for members, while for companies, they would create a better educated, and, therefore, more adaptable workforce.

Large organisations such as the Post Office, Shell, and British Coal are following developments at Ford with interest. Ron Lander, long-standing council member of the CBI in Scotland, claims companies would realise good business sense, rather than social conscience, led to the Ford deal.

NUPE'S WORKBASE SCHEME

Prior to the Ford agreement, a few WPE schemes were operating in England. In 1978, the National Union of Public Employees was instrumental in setting up "Workbase" after talks with the University of London. The university's training committee and the union agreed that manual workers would be released for two hours a week to undertake a course in literacy or in English as a second language.

Workbase now acts as consultant to both the public and private sector, devising training strategies for manual workers. It brings together employers, educationalists and trade unionists, and liaises with the CBI. Workbase has now overseen 80 courses devised for a range of workers, from packers at Polygram Records to cleaners and kitchen assistants at the University of London.

SHEFFIELD'S TAKE TEN PROJECT

In the early 1980s, Sheffield City Council launched Take Ten, a scheme designed for low paid workers failed by the formal education system and overlooked by the council's training and development practices. The scheme allows employees to take a day off a week for ten weeks to study. About 200 workers complete the scheme each year.

Some of these schemes provide useful models for future development of WPE and will be discussed in section 4. The recent arrival of WPE in Scotland will be described in the next section. Although Scotland's WPE experience is limited, early signs indicate workers and companies would benefit from widespread adoption of WPE schemes.

SECTION 3

THE SCOTTISH EXPERIENCE

Scotland lags behind the rest of Europe in its adoption of workplace education. Our first WPE scheme was launched in 1988 after discussions between the Scottish Community Education Council (SCEC) and Lothian Regional Council's Adult Basic Education Unit. The initiative was followed by a SCEC-sponsored research project into the educational needs of two groups of manual workers in Edinburgh. The findings of that study and the success of the first WPE scheme add to the wider evidence that WPE expansion would make a valuable contribution to the future of the Scottish economy.

The Lothian WPE pilot

In 1988, ten home helps employed by Lothian Regional Council took part in a ten-week WPE pilot which covered a variety of subjects including basic literacy and numeracy, metric measurements, pension schemes and women's health. The course, organised by the region's adult basic education unit and the SCEC, was aimed specifically at low paid workers with little or no school qualifications who had little access to on-the-job training. The region's social work

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department and the adult basic education unit negotiated the course's introduction.

The home helps met one afternoon each week for a couple of hours and were paid at the standard overtime rate. Participants, employers and course organisers all gave the course their seal of approval when it ended. While the home helps' supervisor said the women had grown in confidence, the women said much of what was covered had helped them in their work. Those who admitted to skill deficiencies said embarrassment had prevented them from seeking help earlier.

Literacy and Numeracy Skills in the Workplace - SCEC's report on the basic education needs of manual workers

Encouraged by the response to the Lothian course, SCEC began a survey of basic numeracy and literacy needs among 48 employees - 35 men and 13 women - from the public and private sector. The findings were published in March last year.

After a series of interviews with both employees and their management supervisors, the study discovered a high incidence of basic skills problems and a real desire among employees for a second chance at education through provision at their place of work.

The majority of those interviewed had left school with no qualifications. The research uncovered various reasons for their poor education record. Many had negative experiences at secondary school, others had been too impatient for their first wage packet and some were at school during the war and so their education suffered.

About 25% of those interviewed reported basic skills problems in their present jobs, ranging from difficulties understanding technical language and officialese, to coping with paperwork following promotion. Additionally, 65% said numeracy and literacy deficiencies were hampering activities outside work. More than 70% of those interviewed wanted to participate in workplace education.

They wanted to learn for different reasons. Women, in particular, felt they needed help to develop communication skills - all 13 women interviewed lacked confidence either in their ability to speak in front of groups or to handle interviews or both. Others wanted to develop skills to cope with present posts, seek promotion, undertake work-related training, boost confidence, increase job choices and to take advantage of other learning opportunities. Many wanted to acquire computer-related skills - aware that such technical expertise is now regarded as essential for many jobs.

More conventional adult education schemes run by colleges did not suit the hours of

employment of those who took part in the study. The greatest obstacle to adult education was shift work patterns and, particularly in the case of women, family commitments. Three workers at the private company had previously been forced to give up courses because of shifts and the inability of the course providers to adapt to their needs.

Five of those interviewed felt shy about their poor reading and writing standards and did their best to hide this from colleagues. That three of them had managed to achieve promotion to supervisory positions is evidence of their intelligence and abilities. The extra paperwork associated with their promotions, however, was a constant source of stress and required a disproportionate amount of time.

Interviewees had ideas they felt would reduce feelings of alienation and improve employer/ employee relationships. Many workers said they wanted to develop their knowledge of the organisation which employed them to give them a better understanding of their own position and function within the whole, and perhaps to identify future prospects at work. Companies consider provision of such information essential for a management trainee but it is rarely given to manual workers. Many shop floor workers are convinced that office-bound management do not understand their concerns - a symptom of poor relations between blue and white collar workers. The gap could be bridged to some

extent by workplace courses which included sessions on the organisation and the concerns of groups within it.

Conclusions of SCEC study

The study provides the first evidence of a need and desire for WPE in Scotland. The 48 employees interviewed wanted to take part in WPE courses to improve or acquire literacy and numeracy skills. They believed they would then be able to cope better with present jobs, take advantage of further training and increase their chances of promotion. The workers were also eager to have a better understanding of their company's structure and their role within it. By fostering a sense of participation, they claimed job satisfaction would increase and industrial relations improve.

The study claims WPE courses would benefit employers, employees and trade unions, stressing that all have to address problems of equal opportunity, representation and realisation of employee potential.

It warns employers must consider educational needs beyond narrow work-related training, eg by supporting literacy and numeracy courses, employers would ensure a better understanding of written information – including safety instructions. Spin-offs would include better communications and therefore a good chance of improving morale. In helping create a more

educated workforce, employers will be better placed to optimise the skills of their workers. A contented workforce, whose skills and talents are fully tapped, will be a crucial asset in increasingly competitive markets. Happy workers will also be easier to retain.

According to the study, trade unions would benefit from more educated members. Better informed, they would be able to take a fuller part in industrial relations. Women workers, in particular, would be better represented. Although they form an ever-increasing proportion of the workforce, they are under-represented by unions. Women interviewed for the study felt strongly that they had no voice for their concerns and admitted they lacked confidence and speaking and organisational experience that would allow them to represent themselves.

The study also concludes that adult educators, aiming to redress inequalities in education and promoting continuing education and increased access, must focus more on workplace provision. Its findings reinforce the view that most adults take little advantage of present adult provision and, given their limited free time, are unlikely to do so in the future.

SECTION 4

ADAPTABLE MODELS

There are no hard and fast rules about workplace education. Private companies, unions, educationalists and local and national government have set up a variety of schemes in various countries, either unilaterally or in partnership with each other. Below we examine some of the models which have been developed and which might be adapted to suit Scottish business and industry.

Sheffield City Council's Take Ten Scheme

BACKGROUND

This scheme was prompted by the council's desire to provide development opportunities for employees who had missed out in the formal education system or had not benefited from the council's training and development practices. It strives to provide these employees with a chance to develop talents and abilities untapped in their present jobs.

Take Ten's principal objectives are to:

1 Develop individual and group self-confidence.

2 Encourage involvement in decision making at work and in the community.

3 Improve communications in the workplace and strengthen collective identity.

4 Make employees more familiar with the policies and working of the council.

5 Support further education opportunities and career development.

OPERATION

Council employees are recruited by advertising on work notice boards and promotion at work meetings. Application leaflets are handed out by personnel, trade unions and training officers, with all employees in manual, technical and clerical jobs welcome to apply. No previous qualifications are required and selection is carried out by personnel in consultation with tutors, management and unions.

The personnel department is responsible for the project. It has a number of key duties:

1 Publicising the scheme and circulating information.

2 Organising meetings to promote the scheme and recruit employees.

3 Checking the eligibility of all applicants.

4 Liaising with tutors in adult education.

5 Selecting course members in consultation with managers, supervisors, trade union representatives and tutors.

6 Negotiating release and cover with departmental management.

7 Ensuring participants' wages are paid for attending pre-course meetings and subsequent attendance on the course.

8 Informing participants of venues, dates and times.

9 Informing trade unions of members taking part.

10 Keeping records of attendances and absences.

A small sub-committee, of trade union officials, local councillors and personnel and education department representatives, organises at a local level and monitors the system.

The council allows workers time off for their courses with no loss of pay or employment rights. It also finances the courses.

RELEASE AND COVER ARRANGEMENTS

These are negotiated between personnel and the appropriate department. The scheme allows groups of employees to meet for a full or half day each week - depending on whether they work full or part-time - for ten consecutive weeks.

CURRICULUM

A curriculum group develops the core content of Take Ten courses. It is directly responsible to the education department and includes representatives from local colleges, the Department of Continuing Education at Sheffield University, the Take Ten Tutorial Team, trade unions and the personnel department. The subjects covered include: how the council works, education, health, studying, writing, communication skills, computer operation, and how to work with

members of the public. The emphasis is on group working. Films, visits, projects and guest speakers are included where appropriate.

WHAT THE EMPLOYERS SAY

Councillor Steve Jones the chair of the Education committee on Sheffield City Council takes a very positive view of the benefits of Take Ten Courses.

"The courses are very important as part of their single status view of the workforce – where all levels of staff have equal access to educational and training opportunities."

"A spin off from the course can often be how individual workers view their work situation thus can sometimes lead to positive changes being made in how their workplace operates."

WHAT THE EMPLOYEES SAY

The courses have certainly benefited many employees while increasing their value to their employer. Greater confidence is the change most employees recognise in themselves.

"A few weeks ago I would never have chaired a meeting or reported back to people. I would have been too embarrassed. But now I can," says one employee, a lorry driver.

"I found the scheme did give me confidence – confidence to put pen to paper and to get into more discussions. Those things don't come easy to me... by the end of the course I could do them and I did," says another.

Ford Motor Company's EDAP Scheme

BACKGROUND

Ford's Employee Development and Assistance Programme (EDAP), introduced last year at its British plants, is based on a similar but far more extensive scheme which has operated in its American factories since the early 1980s. Both programmes involve the company allocating money for the educational development of all its employees, from manual staff to senior management. In America, the scheme has proved so popular that Ford has now established its own company colleges.

Educational provision was introduced into British pay and conditions negotiations by the company in 1989 and was positively received by union officials. Trade unionists recognise education can improve the employment prospects of their members and help them adapt to different working situations at a time of rapid change. The company maintains that both itself and the workers win under the scheme, stating a happier, more contented workforce is its own chief benefit.

OPERATION

Ford puts £40 per employee each year into a fund which is then used to finance schemes at large plants or within groups of smaller factories. The scheme is run through local committees with equal representation for manual workers, unions and management. Each committee has a full-time coordinator who oversees the working of

the scheme at local level. A national committee, with the same constitution, acts as an umbrella for the local committees.

All employees are entitled to apply for financial support of up to £200 for education courses. They simply fill in a form giving the details of what they wish to do and the local committee considers whether their application falls within the EDAP guidelines. They then approve or reject the application.

RELEASE AND COVER ARRANGEMENTS

In the majority of cases the courses take place in local colleges after working hours. However, the company is considering providing courses on site to suit shift workers.

CURRICULUM

Anything can be studied as long as courses are not similar to those already provided by company training schemes and are not purely recreational. Basic education courses are currently being looked at by local committees. Other interests range from car maintenance to computing skills. Workers can also apply for health-related grants to aid efforts to stop smoking or lose weight.

Although the Ford scheme is still in its infancy, other British companies are showing interest in the development. Lucas Industries in Birmingham is considering developing a similar scheme.

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The Frontier College Workplace Tuition Programme

BACKGROUND

The Frontier College, Canada's oldest adult education institution, began its Learning in the Workplace programme in 1988. The Canadian government provided money for five projects to be set up throughout the country which could be used as models for industry training packages to meet the learning needs of employees in various sectors.

The college is primarily interested in the individual's educational needs. However, while operating within the workplace, it consults with the management, unions and community groups to make sure the programmes benefit everyone involved. These two factors are central to the content of its tailor-made packages.

Frontier College claims the schemes create a skilled, productive workforce, able to keep pace with a rapidly changing economy. Its research indicates a direct relationship between job performance and the ability to use and apply reading, writing and numerical skills. Frontier College maintains well-trained employees are a company's greatest asset. It insists that companies who realise this are joining a new breed of corporations which, by tapping the potential of their employees, are improving productivity and the future prospects of their organisation.

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OPERATION

Employees are recruited by college education experts after volunteering for courses. The words "literacy" and "illiteracy" do not appear in their recruitment literature because experience shows they inhibit people from coming forward. Instead the college concentrates on advertising a range of learning goals eg, understanding and coping with the introduction of new technology. Interviews with prospective learners are conducted in private.

The college also recruits volunteer tutors from the company including supervisors, shop floor workers, clerical staff and managers. Additional tutors are recruited from the wider community. The tutors attend a day-long training session at Frontier College.

The college analyses companies' specific training needs and produces programmes which will be cost effective. Once in place and running smoothly, their main goal is to transfer the running of the programme to the organisation. They are therefore careful to work only with companies who are sincere in their training commitment.

A learning committee is set up between the Frontier College and its client company which is responsible for the logistics of the programme and which will look after it once the pilot phase is over. Once the programme is established, the Frontier College plays a more consultative role.

RELEASE AND COVER ARRANGEMENTS

These are organised by the company. Learners are divided into groups according to their interests and needs. Arrangements vary, but in the first project hour-long tutoring sessions took place on company premises at least once a week and then twice a week when the programme gained momentum. The company allowed employees half an hour off work while the workers made up the additional time from their lunch hour.

CURRICULUM

In line with their Student Centred Individualised Learning (SCIL) approach - based on the premise that everyone, given the right conditions, can learn to read and write - the college does not advocate a predetermined curriculum. There are a wide range of subjects covered such as the teaching of basic literacy, more advanced literacy, English as a second language, and preparation for technology.

BENEFITS TO EMPLOYEES

When Molson, the lager company, installed new machinery in a Toronto brewery in 1987, a 43-year-old production-line worker, who had been employed by the company for 13 years, was downgraded to the position of cleaner and had to accept a pay cut. The employee was simply unable to read the technical manual that had to be understood for the work. The setback caused him to enrol in a Frontier College literacy course and after three months his reading ability improved dramatically and he was reemployed in his old job.

Italy's 150-hour WPE scheme

BACKGROUND

In Italy, workers have a legal right to 150 hours a year of paid educational leave. That right was established in 1973 and since then 150-hour courses have developed to also involve the unemployed, housewives and conscript soldiers.

Most of those who join the 5,000 courses run throughout the country are studying for their secondary school leaving qualification, encouraged back to education by regulations which require this qualification for all recruits to local government posts. That ruling is being extended to cover an increasing number of occupations. With statistics showing that more than 70% of Italian workers leave schools without their secondary qualification, it is unsurprising that 100,000 Italians enrol each year for 150-hour courses.

OPERATION OF THE SCHEME

The state and local authorities financially support the 150-hour courses. The state provides premises, some teaching materials, and teaching and non-teaching staff. Local authorities provide the funds for adult education courses. The division of financial responsibility between local and central government varies depending on the geographical area.

The courses run according to national agreements negotiated by unions and government. At a local level, their day to day operation is overseen by a committee representing the unions concerned.

The local committees attend to course publicity and annual renegotiation of course funds. The fine tuning of each set of courses also varies from region to region but its operation in Bologna is fairly typical. There, courses take place in the local school and are arranged at times which suit the circumstances of the adult learners. Those with time off work are free to attend afternoon or evening courses, while housewives tend to opt for classes in the afternoons. Unfortunately the national scheme offers no child-care facilities, discouraging many women from taking up the educational opportunity.

RELEASE AND COVER ARRANGEMENTS

Any worker can join a class. In certain categories of employment, workers must match the 150 hours allowed by government with 200 hours of their own free time. For other categories of employees, such as textile workers and engineers, there is an allowance of 250 hours a year study with less encroachment on employees' own time. Only 2% of a workforce can be on release to courses at any one time.

CURRICULUM

Tutors try to tailor curricula as much as possible to the individual interests and experiences of the wide range of individuals taking up courses. Some of those who come to courses cannot

read and write. The attempts to tailor courses, however, is restricted significantly by the certification curriculum set down by the Ministry of Education. Italian, history, maths, science and a foreign language must be studied but tutors incorporate health, environment and economic issues into this framework. The students are graded on both final exam performance and continuous assessment.

CONCLUSIONS

Workplace education – the provision of educational courses for employees at their place of work or during their working hours without loss of pay – has a crucial role to play in combating the 1990s skills crisis. Companies will feel the full force of the demographic time-bomb in the run up to the new millennium when, with 16-18-year-olds in short supply, they will have to fall back on their existing workforces for the skills which will ensure their competitiveness at home and abroad.

Manual workers and women, traditionally over-looked for promotion or retraining, will become a valuable asset. For a high proportion of these employees, inadequate numeracy and literacy skills may be all that is preventing the development of their full potential. It is here that WPE – the most acceptable and suitable form of adult education for many employees – can play its vital part.

Employee, employer and union support for the concept of learning in the workplace has been demonstrated in projects in Britain, Europe and North America. The desire and need for WPE in Scotland was recently recorded in "Literacy and Numeracy Skills in the Workplace – A report on the Basic Education Needs of Manual Workers" – a study commissioned by the Scottish Community Education Council.

For the employer who invests in WPE, the rewards are numerous. Those who assist their workers with basic literacy and numeracy courses will create more adaptable employees. Better able to understand written information and instructions, they will be more able to cope with present jobs and to take on the new skills a company needs during a difficult recruitment period.

The spin-offs could include better communication between management and workers and improved morale. Better educated and their skills fully tapped, the workforce is likely to be more contented. A happy state of affairs at a time when retaining staff will be a top priority for companies.

Trade unions would also benefit from more educated members. Findings from the SCEC study suggest women in particular would become better represented - a consequence unions have declared themselves eager to achieve.

At a time when our competitors will be striving to produce highly skilled workers for new international markets, employers and educators must realise the opportunities WPE presents in the development of an untapped skills source – the manual and female worker. The SCEC study reinforces the view that most adults take little advantage of present formal and informal provision and, given the limited free time they have, are unlikely to do so in the future. They are, however, well disposed to the idea of WPE.

For those interested in setting up, supporting or collaborating in WPE, the Massachusetts Economics Affairs Office has issued model guidelines based on the plethora of different adult literacy programmes operating in the States.

It recommends that:

1 Programmes be publicised in terms of growth not deficiency, noting that no matter what conditions are actually responsible for limited literacy, no matter what other skills have been learned since school, those with basic learning difficulties see their failure in this area as proof of an inability to learn.

Any appeal to education based on remedial help simply plays into a sense of inadequacy. Help must therefore be dressed up, often tied to skills employees need for job advancement and security. For example, one third of Polaroid's workforce enrolled in a company-sponsored remedial education programme which was billed as a technology readiness programme.

2 Peer and supervisor support is crucial in employee literacy programmes.

Often this can be developed to include extra tuition from more literate workmates to supplement other classes.

3 It is important that the course and the place it is held in do not resemble the school environment in which so many failed. Classes should be held

In an adult environment and the educational approach must also be adult.

4 Those creating workplace literacy curriculums should remember that if materials are of adult interest, employees will struggle to read at a higher level.

The Scottish Community Education Council are at present involved in promoting the development of Workplace Education. They are able to offer a variety of services to provide information, assistance with planning and development of workplace education, together with any training that might be required.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the support of British Petroleum Company P.L.C. and Scotlander Ltd. in the production of this book. Their assistance has made a wider distribution of the details of workplace education possible.

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Edited by Sandra Macaskill

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